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Milich, Stephan / Pannewick, Friederike / Tramontini, Leslie (eds). *Conflicting Narratives: War, Trauma and Memory in Iraqi Culture*. Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2012, 286 pp., ISBN 978-3-89500-806-1.

Conflicting Narratives: War, Trauma and Memory in Iraqi Culture is the result of a conference held at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at Philipps-Universität Marburg in 2008, in cooperation with the research program "Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe" based in Berlin. The book examines the diverse and often conflicting representations of war, violence and destruction in Baathist and post-Baathist Iraq. It does so through the analysis of various cultural practices, mainly that of literature, but also other *lieux de mémoire*, such as monuments and commemorations. The work is divided into four main parts: I. Cultural and Political Narratives, II. Poetics of Trauma, III. The Dialectic of Home and Exile, and IV. *Shahādāt*: Essays on the Poetic of Semantics of the "Iraqi Place". The book also includes an introduction by Stephan Milich, Friederike Pannewick and Leslie Tramontini, as well as a short biography of each contributor.

In the first chapter (I. Cultural and Political Narratives), Fatima Mohsen's paper proposes an analysis, not only of the obvious dissimilarities between Iraqi writers of the exile and those writing inside Iraq, but also their similarities. For instance, while the "War generation" of Iraqi authors writing within the country were mainly concerned with Saddam Hussein's prowess and battle victories, those outside Iraq stressed the cruelty and futility of war. Thus, even if their ethical values concerning war were opposite, "their preoccupations were almost identical" (11). In her contribution, Leslie Tramontini faces the numerous ethical problems of reading and studying poets who held official positions in Baathist Iraq. Can we consider studying someone as an intellectual if he did not speak against a dictatorial regime? Tramontini convincingly argues that viewing an intellectual as one who *should* necessarily oppose the state is a normative view. This idea was indeed put to the test in 2003 and eventually found to be false, since "the intellectuals who are categorized as 'inside' and 'outside' in the post-Saddam period are not necessarily identical with the ones during Saddam's rule" (42). Hala Fattah examines oral testimonies by two authors who have lived and experienced writing during the Hashemite period (Fu'ād al-Takarlī and 'Alī al-Sa'īdī). Because she focuses on their personal representation of that era – rather than

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that of their literary production – her contribution is more a historical than a literary overview. She highlights the contrast between al-Takarlī who tends to idealize the monarchical past – even though he had expressed himself against it at the time – with al-Sa'īdī, who does not. However, she comes to the conclusion that for both authors "Iraqis are not particularly religious; on the contrary, religion is seen to have been imposed on the country as a political ploy" (59).

In the second part on "Poetics of Trauma", Friederike Pannewick examines a novel by Sinān Anṭūn (*I'jām*, 2006). Based on the analysis of individuality and subversive humor, she argues that from the end of the 1970s, Iraqi and – more generally Arabic – literature has shifted from a *revolutionary* one, i.e. a literature targeting the people as a whole, to a *subversive* one, i.e. a literature aiming at "the individual and his/her involvement in society" (66). Wiebke Walther's contribution is concerned with war poetry during the Iran-Iraq war. She analyses the use of classical Arabic war poetry as a mean of propaganda by the Baathist regime. She shows how Saddam Hussein successfully manipulated literature and cinema directly to link his battle victories with those of the first Muslim conquests – notably the famous battle of *al-Qādisiyya* against the Sassanids in 636 – in order to consolidate his power. Baram, Rohde and Zeidel's paper highlights the subtleties of commemorative production in the public sphere from 1958 to 2010. They notably examine the discrepancy between state-sponsored forms of commemorative culture and alternative grass-roots movements in Baathist Iraq and its consequences on the post-Baathist era. They come to the conclusion that since 2003, the culture of remembrance from above has been overall neglected, owing to the active participation of the population in the construction of a collective memory. In his analysis of the work of five contemporary poets writing in Iraq after 2003 (Ḥasan 'Abd al-Rāḍī, Jamāl Jāsīm Amīn, Ḥusayn al-Qāṣid, 'Umar al-Sarāy and Ḥamad Maḥmūd al-Dūkhī) Flayḥ Rikābī observes a dynamism of time and place. Linking the notions of past, present and future with those of suffering, happiness, and hope, Rikābī highlights the fragility of the Iraqi homeland: "Iraq is a carton of eggs carried by a kangaroo" he quotes Ḥamad Maḥmūd al-Dūkhī (139). Stephan Milich explores the representations of traumatic experiences, such as war, exile, solitude and martyrdom in the work of the poet Kamāl Sabtī and stresses his critical views, even though he wrote during the Baath period. For instance, his poem "The Martyr" in which the dead soldier is impersonated by a tear falling from a breathless heart eventually entering an empty house, an image that suggests that the martyr has suffered and died in vain.

In the third part, Iraqi voices from England, Sweden, Germany and elsewhere outside Iraq are put to the front. Christiane Schlote explores the theme of war in four theater plays, two by British authors (David Hare and Jonathan Holmes), and two by Iraqis (Hassan Abdulrazzak and Jawad Al Assadi). She shows how the

Iraqi authors of *Baghdad Wedding* (2007) and *Baghdadi Bath* (2005) make use of a writing strategy that could be called the "terror and mirth" technique where horror and humor are used in complicity in order to express the Iraqi tragedy. Abdulwahid Lu'lu'a examines the work of two "surviving Iraqi poets of the golden 1950's" (ʻAbd al-Razzāq ʻAbd al-Wāḥid and Muẓaffar al-Nawwāb) as well as younger ones, all living in exile. Lu'lu'a most notably tackles the issue of the "home-exile" poets, i.e. writers who are part of the million Iraqis who settled in other parts of the country for security reasons. In her analysis of two Iraqi novelists writing in Sweden (Salām ʻAbbūd and Janān Jāsim Ḥillāwī), Astrid Ottosson al-Bitar argues that most works produced in Sweden are mainly concerned with the Baath period, and at times with the Qāsim period. Based on Bakhtin's definition of the epic narrative, she argues that both periods incarnate, respectively, the perfect *official narrative* and the perfect *counter-narrative* for the backdrop of a novel. Andreas Pflitsch looks at two novels written in German by Iraqi authors (Sherko Fattah and ʻAbbās Khiḍr), as well as one written in Arabic (Nājim Wālī), in order to compare the various strategies to write exile. Through the figure of Kerim, the Alevi protagonist of the migration novel *Das dunkle Schiff* (2008) by Sherko Fattah, Pflitsch asks if migration and exile offer a solution to the problem of Iraq, or if they are actually part of it. Can one forget trauma if one does not talk about it, or do traumas "assume monstrous dimensions" on the contrary, Kerim asks.

In the introduction to the last part of the book concerned with places and their relation to memory in Iraq, Atef Botros notes that the word *al-makān* (Arabic for "the place") "does not only describe a location with specific meaning or a statement of place, [...] it can be also considered a container of memory" (227), as the word is derived from the root "to be" (*kān*). Similarly, we could use the image on urbanism put forward by André Corboz, who compares places such as the city to a never-ending "palimpsest" in which new layers – real or virtual – constantly superpose or replace previous elements. The five contributions of Ḥaydar Saʻīd, Aḥmad Saʻdāwī, Ṣafāʼ ʻAlwān, Jāsim ʻĀṣī and ʻAbbās Khiḍr (all translated by Yasmeen Hanoosh) indeed illustrate that notion: Saʻīd through a multilayered metaphorization of Najaf; Saʻdāwī's reflection on how Thawra City, a city quarter developed in the 1960s for poor Shiite families, created its own memory from scratch; and ʻAlwān with his numerous life memories of the town of Qalʻat Sukkar. The last two are not centered around a home *per se*, but also reflect on two very symbolic places in Iraq's recent history – the battlefield for ʻĀṣī and the prison for Khiḍr.

All contributions combine high scholarly quality with inspiring knowledge. The merits of this book are many: I will only mention here what are, in my view, its three main achievements. First, in an attempt to enrich the debate, the views

of cultural stakeholders who produce representations and verbalize them are conjoined with those who examine them through a historical, anthropological or literary lens. Each author's narrative nourishes those of the other authors, and in their combination these narratives lead to a new perspective.

Second, each contribution critically reflects – in its own way – on the arbitrary categorization of "inside" and "outside" cultural production, i.e. pro-regime *vs.* anti-regime literary world. This systematic approach prompts the reader to reflect on the importance of analyzing war-time cultural production as a whole, be it by those who support it or by those who resist it. More generally, it asks about the function of culture, the role of the intellectual, and the purpose of art. *Need* Iraqi art necessarily be political? And if so, is Baath-sponsored art more valuable than resistant art? These questions had to be asked in the context of post-Baathist Iraq, where the *bottom up* and the *top-down* perspectives on culture were so abruptly reversed.

Third and last, but by no means least, this study fills a documentary gap regarding the richness of Iraqi cultural production in the 20th century: it touches upon poetry, novels, theater, cinema, architecture, and visual arts. Compared to cultural production in other parts of the Arab world, contemporary Iraqi cultural history is too often disregarded, both by non-Iraqi Arabs and – ironically enough – by Iraqis themselves. This book thus represents a powerful challenge to this neglect. The quality of the contributions taken aside, one minor remark concerns its structure and chapter organization. With the exception of the last two chapters (III. The Dialectic of Home and Exile and IV. *Shahādāt*: Essays on the Poetic Semantics of the "Iraqi Place"), in which all contributions focus on the exile and on the symbolic function of *the Iraqi place* respectively, the lack of coherence in the order and appearance of titles is regrettable. For the first part of the book, it is indeed difficult to identify an overarching topic.

This study offers valuable materials and constitutes a major contribution to the research on the contemporary cultural history of both Iraq and the Arab world. The book will be indispensable to scholars working on Arabic literature and on Iraqi cultural history. Finally, it is a useful source for researchers working on migration and diaspora studies in general, both from a historical and a literary perspective, as the book discusses questions applicable to other regions around the globe too.